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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 PRETORIA 002602

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EEB/TRA/OTP
DAKAR FOR MO KEANE
FAA FOR NANCY ANGELO
ROME FOR ANTHONY GIOVANNIELLO

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TAGS: [EAIR](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [CASC](#) [OTRA](#) [ATRN](#) [FAA](#) [ICAO](#) [SF](#)
SUBJECT: SERIES OF AIRLINK INCIDENTS TESTS SOUTH AFRICAN CIVIL
AVIATION AUTHORITY'S OVERSIGHT REFORMS

REF: A. 08 PRETORIA 1791, B. 08 PRETORIA 73, C. STATE 38571

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. A spate of recent accidents/incidents involving South African Airlink has raised concerns about the safety record of the carrier. Privately owned Airlink also provides regional service to Lesotho, Mozambique, Madagascar, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe with over 3,500 flights per month. The South African Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) took swift and what appears to be appropriate oversight action. Airlink worked through the weekend to address corrective actions and avoided being grounded by the CAA. The Department of Transport gave Airlink until December 21, to address all compliance requirements identified by the CAA. CAA oversight capacity was boosted significantly after a round of FAA consultative meetings from 2007-2008. The CAA took swift action in a similar case with low-cost carrier Nationwide in early 2008; Nationwide ceased operations in April 2008. The CAA insists lack of alternatives to Airlink for regional air services at a time of high holiday season demand does not have an impact on how Airlink is being handled. Post will continue to monitor and report on the status of the CAA investigation and oversight process. End Summary.

AIRLINK HISTORY AND NETWORK

¶2. (U) Privately owned South African Airlink (SA Airlink) was formed through the amalgamation of a number of small local airlines (Border Air, Citi Air, Link Airways, Lowveld Aviation Services, Magnum Airways and Midlands Aviation) in 1967. The airline, renamed Airlink in 2006, has developed into South Africa's first feeder network, specifically aimed at linking smaller domestic cities and regional centers hubs throughout Southern Africa. Airlink operates over 3,500 flights per month and serves more than 25 destinations in Southern Africa. It provides regional service to Lesotho, Mozambique, Madagascar, Swaziland, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Quite a few USG personnel use the carrier regularly for their regional duties and for personal travel.

¶3. (U) Airlink formed a strategic alliance with South Africa's national carrier South African Airways (SAA) in 1997. The alliance was dissolved in 2006, but Airlink retains certain cooperative agreements with SAA such as joint online booking and ticketing systems. Airlink carries over 65,000 passengers every month

utilizing a fleet of Jet stream 41 aircraft, ERJ 135 jet aircraft, BAe 146-200 aircraft, and BAe 146-RJ85 aircraft. Airlink's passenger profile is composed of 70 percent business and 30 percent leisure travelers. Airlink successfully completed the International Air Transport Association (IATA) Operational Safety Audit and was placed on the IATA Register on February 6, 2008.

SERIES OF AIRLINK SAFETY INCIDENTS
LEADS TO CAA INVESTIGATION

¶4. (U) A spate of incidents in late 2009 (July, September, October, November, and December) have raised concerns about safety procedures at Airlink. One of these incidents, the crash of Airlink flight Qat Airlink. One of these incidents, the crash of Airlink flight 8911 near Durban, was due to engine failure and caused one fatality (pilot). Engine failure was also the cause of the July incident in Cape Town. In response to these incidents, the CAA audited Airlink's maintenance and flight operations programs.

¶5. (U) The CAA submitted the results of its audits to Airlink and the Minister of Transport Sbu Ndebele on December 11. (Note: Airlink worked through the weekend to address initial corrective actions and avoid being grounded by the CAA. End Note.) The Department of Transport reviewed the CAA findings and announced that Airlink could continue operations, subject to providing a "comprehensive corrective action plan" and meeting compliance levels within seven days (by December 21). An independent review of Airlink's flight safety processes and procedures has also commenced.

¶6. (U) The CAA's audit raised concerns relating to administrative procedures and management structures at Airlink's Technical

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facility. While such reports are not normally made public, it was reported that there were three "observations and recommendations" regarding flight operations and 12 "findings" with respect to the airline's maintenance program. CAA is making inspectors and other technical experts available to Airlink to assist with this process.

CAA OVERSIGHT CAPACITY BOOSTED
AFTER FAA CONSULTATION PROCESS

¶7. (SBU) CAA oversight capacity was boosted significantly after a round of FAA International Aviation Safety Assessment (IASA) consultative meetings during 2007-2008. A FAA IASA consultation visit in July 2007 identified significant deficiencies in the CAA's aviation safety oversight system, which threatened South Africa's ability to maintain its Category I status. As a result, the South African Department of Transport created a special task team to consult with the FAA on required reforms to the CAA and corresponding national aviation legislation. A former SAA pilot with years of safety and security oversight experience, Colin Jordaan, was brought in as the new CAA CEO/Commissioner to head the reform process (Ref B).

¶8. (SBU) The FAA validated South Africa's safety oversight system in July 2008, after a collaborative consultation process. The FAA concluded the consultation process once the CAA was able to demonstrate progress with the recruitment and training of airworthiness and other technical inspectors (Ref A). FAA's IASA legal experts also provided technical assistance on amendments to the South African Civil Aviation Act. A new Civil Aviation Act came into force in December 2009 and provided the CAA with a direct reporting line to the Minister of Transport.

CAA FLEXED OVERSIGHT MUSCLE
IN NATIONWIDE CASE

¶9. (SBU) Under the leadership of Colin Jordaan, the CAA took swift action to ground low-cost carrier Nationwide after an accident in November 2007. CAA suspended Nationwide's aircraft maintenance organization and its fleet's airworthiness certificates after inspection of its operations in early 2008. Nationwide did not recover from the grounding and subsequent global economic downturn. It ceased operations in April 2008.

¶10. (SBU) There are few alternatives to Airlink for regional travel. Some industry commentators note that the CAA is likely to take less severe action against Airlink than it took against Nationwide, particularly with high demand for air services this holiday period and for the coming World Cup. Nonetheless, the CAA insists lack of alternatives to Airlink for regional air services has not influenced how Airlink is being handled.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) A few years ago, the South African CAA suffered from a lack of independence and safety oversight capacity. Like other civil aviation authorities in the region, the CAA and local aviation industry was losing technical expertise to foreign carriers and oversight organizations that offered higher salaries. However, SAG leadership recognized the importance of retaining international Qleadership recognized the importance of retaining international safety oversight standards, under threat of losing South Africa's Category I status with the FAA just before hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup. As a result of FAA consultations, the SAG launched reform efforts and modernized civil aviation legislation to improve oversight at CAA.

¶11. (SBU) The CAA has not hesitated in taking strict oversight and corrective actions against carriers such as Nationwide and Airlink. With the World Cup less than six months away, the CAA is anxious to maintain international safety oversight standards and address any safety capacity shortfalls at local carriers so that feeder service will be available when football fans and teams arrive. Post will

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continue to monitor and report on the status of the CAA oversight and investigation process.

GIPS